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DAILY TROJAN

NEWSPAPER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

MONDAY

March 1, 1999
Vol. CXXXVI, No. 29

Raving about Raya

This young jazz singer has a style that's unique and fresh — not to mention an amazing voice

By RACHEL CAMPBELL
Features Editor

Soft, sultry sounds of jazz drift above the murmur of people socializing at Rix, a trendy Santa Monica restaurant and bar. Off to the side, a young jazz band led by singer Raya Yarbrough, a USC freshman majoring in vocal jazz, is into its second set of the evening

"Gigs like Rix are great places to play, but you don't get the kind of attention you get at a concert," said Yarbrough, whose band has performed at The Jazz Bakery, Catalina's Bar and Grill, Club Thelonius and other places. "My intention is to play for people who want to come and see us."

Yarbrough is not a newcomer to the scene of performing. At the age of 7, she started singing jazz in front of audiences with her father, who is a singer and a songwriter. "I did it because it was fun, but sometimes it was tiresome," she said. "It was always my choice to perform though."

As a child, Yarbrough was on her way to becoming a star. She started writing her own songs at 11. Three years later, she began working with a producer on a demo tape of original material.

"This didn't really work out," Yarbrough said. "He was trying to turn me into something I wasn't. He was simply catering to the styles and musical trends that were popular at the time, regardless of whether my heart was in it. That's when I realized I'd eventually have to have a band of musicians with similar creative vibes if I was to develop my own sound."

Currently Yarbrough and her band, which includes pianist Zac Rae, a sophomore majoring in jazz studies, drummer Nadir Jeevanjee, a sophomore majoring in physics, bassist Ethan Phillips, a junior majoring jazz studies and USC graduate Jeremy Drake on guitar, are working on an album expected for release this summer. It will be engineered by Stewart Banks, a senior majoring in music recording.

"I feel so lucky to be with these musicians," Yarbrough said. "They're all phenomenal players and always tactful."

The album will consist of nine original songs written by Yarbrough. She described the music as "pop with jazz roots," and added "everyone who had heard some if it has a different take on what kind of music they think it is, or what other artists it reminds them of." But Yarbrough said she would rather be known for her own style than being compared to anyone else.

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Azad Jafarian | Daily Trojan

The right attitude. A young talent with a future, jazz singer Raya Yarbrough looks for her own style.

Photos courtesy of Raya Yarbrough

(Left) Yarbrough performs at her high school graduation at Crossroads School for Arts and Sciences in Santa Monica, where she studied music and drama.

(Above) Yarbrough performing solo at the Playboy/Pasadena Jazz Festival with the Spotlight Award band.

Raya: Singer wants to change 'waiting room' jazz image

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The band's temporary name is "Raya Yarbrough," but they welcome suggestions. "No, really we need them," Yarbrough said.

Even without a flashy name, the band has been performing together since their debut last August when they sold out at The Jazz Bakery.

"The performance at The Jazz Bakery this summer has definitely been a real highlight," Yarbrough said. "I hadn't played for a large group like that for a while. There was a lot of good energy there."

Yarbrough felt her performance at Club Thelonius in January was a turning point for her.

"I had been unsatisfied with some of my performances for a while and I just didn't know what to do about that," she said. "The performance happened to fall at a momentarily difficult point in my life. The emotion that goes along with that helped to give the performance an extra kick. Each song I sang meant something more than it had meant before. That was the first time in a while that I had actually felt my performance. You have to have an experience like that to remember what it's like and what you're striving for."

Yarbrough would like to change the way people look at jazz music. "People see it as ambiance music, like jazz is the stuff you hear in the doctor's waiting room," she said. "That's one of the things I hate about the way jazz music is viewed."

One of the singers Yarbrough looks to for inspiration is Lena Horne, who exemplified the type of personality Yarbrough hopes to exhibit.

"She had this whole issue with her career of being a black entertainer at a time when it was oriented toward white performers," she said. "She had to deal with race issues that aren't being dealt with today. I identify with that because I don't want to be seen as a white performer or black performer."

Yarbrough has been featured in a documentary in a KCET-TV's documentary on the Music Center's Spotlight Award winners and on the jazz radio station KLON-FM.

Other places Yarbrough has performed include the Playboy/Pasadena Jazz Festival where she was featured as a soloist. The band played at Catalina's Bar and Grill in Hollywood last fall and frequently perform at Rix.

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Raya Yarbrough
freshman
vocal jazz